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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THE MANAGEMENT OF ADULT LEARNERS IN A DISTANCE-DELIVERED COURSE

by

SUSAN D. PHILLIPS

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF MASTER OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled "THE MANAGEMENT OF ADULT LEARNERS IN A DISTANCE-DELIVERED COURSE," submitted by SUSAN D. PHILLIPS in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Master of Education.

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ABSTRACT

The participation of adults in post-secondary education has grown dramatically over the past decade and with this increase has emerged the open university offering courses at a distance, however, little is known about the factors which encourage success for students enrolled in courses of this nature. This lack of information is especially noticable in distance-delivered courses where person-to-person contact with students is sporadic and affected by many constraints.

Based on a review of the literature, it appears that the major factors which affect students enrolled in courses of this nature are 1) the content of the course, 2) the structure or instructional design of the course, 3) the interaction of tutors with students, and 4) the management of student activity within the course. This thesis examines the latter two factors and arrives at the conclusion that the management of student activities through the three different course management systems presented here has little effect, if any, upon course completion and achievement and that tutor selection bears the same conclusion. However, student's perceptions about the usefulness of course management systems and tutor interaction is illuminating and warrants acknowledgement of educators planning distance-delivered courses. In addition, student's perceptions of why or why not they completed a course of this kind are presented.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am primarily endebted to Athabasca University who gave me first, the motivation to begin this thesis, and then the means, both financially and logistically to see it to a conclusion.

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CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Introduction

Over the past decade, the number of adults engaging in part-time university-level studies has increased dramatically and there is every indication that this trend will continue.

Coincident with this increase, the concept of the open university emerged and universities of this kind were quickly subscribed to by many adults as the solution to their need for post-secondary education. These universities were considered "open" because of their open admissions policies -- traditional university entrance requirements such as high school matriculation were not prerequisite -- and because of their open delivery systems -- courses offered by these universities were offered at a distance by correspondence or through other media and students could study in their own homes, in independent study, and usually at their own pace. The open university with its lack of constraints offered an attractive alternative to adults wishing to pursue their goals for further education while, at the same time, not severely disrupting their careers and family life.

The Open Universities

Probably the best known open university is the British Open

University which received its charter in 1969. Today the Open University is a major feature of British post-secondary education. It enrolled over 80,000 students for the 1979 academic year: 60,000 of these were undergraduates studying for the B.A. (Open) degree, the remainder enrolled in adult education (non-university) programs (Keegan, 1979). The precepts upon which the British Open University was formed were cogently stated by the Chancellor of the British Open University, Lord Geoffrey Crowther, in his address to the Royal Society in 1969 where he stated:

> We are open first, as to <u>people</u>. Not for us the carefully regulated escalation from one educational level to the next by which the traditional universities establish their criteria for admission.
>
> The first, and most urgent task before us is to cater for the many thousands of people, fully capable of a higher education, who, for one reason or another, do not get it, or do not get as much of it as . . . they need . . .
>
> The Open University is not a rival of existing universities. It is designed to take over where they are compelled to leave off . . .
>
> We are open as to <u>places</u> . . . the university will flow over the United Kingdom . . .
>
> We are open as to <u>methods</u> . . . Every new form of human communication will be examined to see how it can be used to raise and broaden the level of human understanding . . .
>
> We are open, finally, to <u>ideas</u>. (Ferguson, pp. 19-20)

Looking closer to home, two open universities were established in Canada -- the Télé-université located in Ste. Foy,

Quebec and Athabasca University in Edmonton, Alberta. The Télé-université, established in 1972, is one of the constituent institutions of the multi-campus University of Quebec. In 1978, the Télé-université offered courses, at a distance, to approximately 20,000 students.

Athabasca University was first established in 1972 on a pilot project basis to explore the feasibility of producing packaged instructional materials for delivery at a distance and to assess the post-secondary market in Alberta for such a style of education. In November, 1975, these goals were considered accomplished and Athabasca University received the necessary legislative and financial support to enable it to take its place as the province's fourth university. In April, 1978, the university received permanent university status in Alberta.

In Spring, 1979, Athabasca University had an enrollment of about 3,500 students, a doubling of the previous year's (1978) enrollment. It is anticipated that this number will rise to about 5,000 by November, 1979.

Like the British Open University, both the Télé-université and Athabasca University have an open admissions policy, offering courses at a distance through various media, and focussing on the adult learner who cannot or chooses not to attend a traditional university. Athabasca University, the setting upon which this thesis is based, is aptly described by the following excerpt from the

university calendar:

> Athabasca University is not only Alberta's fourth and newest university; it is also Canada's fastest growing university. It is fully accredited and offers undergraduate university programs and courses to adult Albertans who, for various reasons, are unable to attend conventional universities. Our goal is to make university education accessible to, and possible for, any adult Albertan who wants it.
>
> To make university learning accessible to people throughout the province, Athabasca University uses an open, distance education approach. Our only admission requirement is that students be eighteen years of age or older, but our openness is also manifested in other ways. For example, we make it possible for you to enroll in courses at any time, to arrange flexible programs of study, to work at your own pace, and generally to learn without the constraints of conventional classroom study. Most of this openness is made possible by our distance education approach.
>
> Although Athabasca University is located in Edmonton, our campus is wherever our students are studying. Our students learn at home on their own, using packaged learning materials. These materials, which include such things as textbooks, study guides, workbooks, and so on, are often supplemented by cassette tapes and by TV and radio programs broadcast over local channels. Our students use these materials to learn wherever and whenever it is most convenient. The course materials are backed up by tutors, knowledgeable in the subject, who talk with students over the telephone at regular intervals, discussing the course and providing assistance as needed.

The Role of the Tutor

As discussed earlier, for the main part, open universities offer courses at a distance. Typically these are prepackaged learning

materials offered by correspondence often with adjunct television, radio, telephone conferencing, or computer-assisted instructional components. In addition, tutors (or animateurs, as they are termed at the Télé-université), people hired to assist students in their studies, are also included in the instructional system which brings learning to the students.

To illustrate the functioning of the tutor within the delivery system of an open university, the following excerpt from the General Handbook for Tutors, published by Athabasca University, is presented:

> Reduced to its essentials, the function of the tutor is to minimize the isolation of the student, to provide the student with the opportunity to be more than just a recipient of packaged instruction, and to help motivate the student to complete his course successfully. In order to carry out these functions -- and to do so on a part-time basis -- the tutor must show initiative and subtlety in establishing his credibility with the student, ingenuity and sensitivity in keeping the student working, and knowledgeability in answering questions about content.
>
> Experience at Athabasca has shown, as it has similarly shown at the Open University of Great Britain, the Télé-université of Quebec, and elsewhere, that it is not only academic expertise which makes a tutor valuable to students studying on their own, but the human skills such as listening, encouraging, guiding, reassuring, motivating, etc., which mark the "successful" tutor. The tutor must be able to empathize with his or her students, and understand the circumstances within which the student is pursuing his studies.
>
> All the while the tutor must bear in mind that the university's course materials are basically designed for independent study. They do not have to be taught, nor should they be considered as minimum material upon which the tutor can build

> a series of lectures; the courses are designed to stand by themselves. In this context, the tutor is not a lecturer, but rather a supplier of motivation, encouragement, and advice, whose existence and assistance will, it is hoped, check the tendency for student independence to slide into student inertia.

Student Success in Distance-Delivered Courses

Little is known about the factors which encourage success (usually meaning course completion) for students enrolled in distance-delivered courses where person-to-person contact with students is often sporadic and hampered by many constraints ranging from the bureaucracy of the university to the labour problems of the postal system. Recent publications from several universities offering distance-delivered courses suggest that many factors affect the success of students enrolled in their courses. Attrition rates associated with the courses offered by open universities and the like, are evidence for the absence of one or more of these factors.

Completion and Dropout Rates

Completion rates in courses offered at a distance are, for the most part extremely high. They are, as well, difficult to calculate because often courses of this nature are offered on a continuous enrollment basis and the ensuing constant stream of students in the course makes it difficult to ascertain the number of completions.

In a registry report of Athabasca University, 305 new Athabasca University student enrollments in home study courses during October and November 1977 were analyzed by enrollment status. It was found that 55.4

percent of the students had withdrawn without credit (Hammer and Smith, 1979). Harrington (1977) in The Future of Adult Education examined the new opportunities for off-campus credit and noted that in home study courses the dropout rates have been shockingly high, often over 90 percent. Orton (1977) examining completion rates for degree-credit correspondence courses offered by Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario made a useful designation between non-starts and dropouts. Non-starts were defined as students who cancelled their registration before submitting any assignments. Dropouts, on the other hand, were defined as students who cancelled their registration after submitting at least one assignment. Following this designation, two methods for the calculation of completion rates were presented. The first, the Total Enrollments formula, is the one most commonly used in ascertaining completion rates. The formula is:

$$\frac{\text{Completions}}{\text{Total Registrations}} \times 100 = \text{Completion Rate}$$

The second, the NUEA formula, developed by the Independent Study Division of the National University Extension is calculated using the following formula:

$$\frac{\text{Completions}}{\text{Total Registrations - Total Nonstarts}} \times 100 = \text{Completion Rate}$$

The NUEA formula produces a larger completion rate because of the deletion of students who never begin the courses.

Orton (1977), looked at 118 courses in four subjects over a four-year period and calculated completion rates using the Total Enrollment formula ranging from 54.3 percent to 68.9 percent. Using the NUEA formula, completion rates ranged from 78.0 to 85.8 percent. Non-start rates ranged from 14.7 percent to 32.9 percent.

Donehower (1968) reviewed the completion rates reported by fifty-six institutions offering correspondence study courses for university level students. She reported completion rates calculated using the Total Enrollment formula ranging from 18.7 to 63.8 percent. Completion rates calculated using the NUEA formula ranged from 35.7 percent to 76.5 percent. Non-start rates were not reported.

An attrition study conducted at Empire State University (Bradley and Lehmann, 1975) followed 877 students who enrolled between August 1, 1973 and January 31, 1974. When a one-year period had elapsed, 23.7 percent had completed, 33.0 percent were still enrolled, and 43.2 percent had withdrawn. This study indicates the difficulty involved in calculating completion rates in a context of continuous enrollments.

Keegan (1979) reporting on dropouts in a course at the British Open University noted a completion rate of 71.0 percent in a Science foundation course and 69.0 percent in a second level Social Science course. He comments upon this high rate of completion when he states:

> From the start of the planning for the Open University in 1969 there was a constant preoccupation with the reduction of the expected dropout rate . . . It is fair to say that the reduction of this is central to the University's philosophy and is regarded as one of its basic achievements (Keegan, pp. 11-12)

To place the above-mentioned completion rates in context, they can be compared with the completion rates in traditional universities. The most recent American data on dropouts is provided by Pentages and Creedon (1978) in their exhausive study of United States Colleges and Universities. Their main conclusions are:

> For every ten students who enter college in the United States, only four will graduate from that college four years later. One more will eventually graduate from the college at some point after those four years. Of the five students who dropped out of the college altogether, four will reenroll at a different college, and of those four enrollees, only two will graduate. Of the six students who dropped out, three did so during the first year. Two more dropped out during the second year, and the last one dropped out at some point after the second year. Three of the ten students who originally entered college will never obtain a college degree. This means that of the estimated 7.6 million undergraduates enrolled in the U.S. in 1971, roughly 2.3 million students will drop out of higher education completely. (Pentages and Creedon, p. 49)

Reasons for Non-Completion

As the prior discussion evidenced, clearly there are deterrents keeping students from being successful in their learning. The following were identified as the major reasons that students give for not completing courses delivered at a distance.

The primary reason for not completing a course appears to be lack of time. Carp et al. (1973) in surveying dropouts from courses offered by the University of Mid-America found that "not enough time" was the primary reason given by students failing to complete a course. Similarly, McIntosh (1978), investigating students at the Open University,

reported that "lack of time" in some form or other was mentioned in most answers given and that "academic difficulty" was not an important factor in students' decisions not to continue. In a study conducted at Empire State University (Bradley and Lehmann, 1975), 41.0 percent of students not completing a course stated that health, family problems, or moving out of the community were the basic cause of their withdrawal; 31.0 percent reported that job-related problems were the main reason. Dropouts said that they could not handle the scheduling or reallocation of their time so that both college, work, and job responsibilities could be maintained. Twenty-one percent of students leaving reported that a poor relationship with their mentor (tutor) was the primary reason for their withdrawal. Harrington (1977) mentions that high on the list of reasons for failure of much of distance education is the sense of loneliness that brings discouragement to students studying on their own.

Methods for Improving Success in Distance-Delivered Courses

From the prior discussion, reducing the dropout rate would appear to be a desirable aim for institutions offering courses at a distance. For not only does a high dropout rate indicate that a large number of students are failing in their learning activities, but high dropout rates also mean lost revenue in the form of tuition. MacKenzie et al. (1968) make this latter point in their book Correspondence Instruction in the U.S. where they discuss the problem of "non-starts"

(students who register in a course, but never submit the first lesson) as they relate to private home study schools. Their arguments, however, also apply to Universities offering courses at a distance.

Two routes appear to be the most promising for reducing dropout rates: (1) counselling in the form of screening and tutorial services, and (2) systems for managing student activity in the course which include pacing schedules and time management.

MacKenzie et al. (1968) point out that frequently a high percentage of non-starts will give the supplying institution reason to reexamine its enrollment and screening procedures (p. 97). Keegan, in his discussion of the Open University, states that the link between course materials and learning -- the link which will also "ensure that learning will in fact, take place" and tries "to prevent avoidable dropouts" -- is provided by "an interlocking grouping of at least eight components, most of which are optional to the student and come under the control of the University's Regional Tutorial Services department. These are:

* A tutor/counsellor who follows the student throughout his career.
* A tutor who is available for consultation on work after the first year.
* 13 regional offices for decentralization administration.
* A local study centre where he [the student] can meet other students.
* Computerized student records that can pick up problems in students' progress.

* Residential summer schools, students' associations."

(Keegan, p. 13)

Keegan goes on to make the point that too often educators feel that their job is done once learning materials are developed and mailed to students; when learning fails to occur, it appears that the fault lies with the omission of the link between course materials and the learning that is to occur as a result.

Harris (1975) studying students engaged in further education courses in Manchester, supports the Open University approach:

> There is little doubt that the home study students improved their effectiveness in study where they were able to combine their correspondence courses with other study methods. These included part-time class attendance itself, private tuition and even full-time study for a limited period. However, over two-thirds of the total numbers surveyed had had no other tuition for their courses than correspondence courses. It is therefore not surprising that nearly half of those studying only by this one method had dropped out of study by three to four years later. (Harris, p. 368)

Miller (1978) recommends the following attributes to institutions desiring to attract and retain students in non-traditional courses (of which distance-delivered courses are a subset). She states:

> First, educators must recognize the life situations and personal needs of older students. Programs designed for adults must address the issues of time flexibility, location appropriateness, financial feasibility, and length of the degree program.

> And second, all non-traditional programs for adults must meet the educational needs and developmental stages of adult learners. Successful programs need to take external constraints into consideration, give credit for prior learning, build self-understanding and self-confidence, provide relevant education, and recognize the life phases, ego stages, and learning styles of individual students. (Miller, pp. 47-48)

In addition, the management of student's activities within the course also appears to be a major factor contributing to student success. Tosti and Wilson (1972) indicate that instructional management -- "those activities involved in the decision to initiate a specific activity for a given student, based upon an assessment of that student's performance" -- is a necessary component of all courses (p. 26). They also point out that a student's completion of a course is dependent upon his or her ability to move at a steady rate through the course materials. Research conducted by Donehower (1968) further supports these claims. She concludes:

> Students enrolled in correspondence study courses must rely on themselves to a greater extent than students in residence because there is no set schedule of classes to attend or specific dates of examinations. Self-reliance and perseverance on the part of the student, therefore, are most important if the student is to be successful; first, in the completion of the course requirements, and second, in the obtaining of a satisfactory grade for his efforts.

and goes on to make the following recommendation:

> As the time lapse between enrollment and submission of the first assignment has a significant relationship on the probability the student will complete the course, the student should be encouraged to submit his lessons as soon as possible. (Donehower, p. 76)

Anderson and Tippy (1971) surveyed students enrolled in correspondence courses through the University of Illinois. In response to their questionnaires, they discovered that 68 percent of students had set up their own course completion schedule. Of these students, 15 percent reported that they were behind and could not catch up, 65 percent were behind but felt that they could catch up, and 20 percent were on schedule. When students were questionned about whether they would like to establish a personalized lesson schedule and have the Correspondence Courses Office remind them if they fell behind schedule, 60 percent answered no, 22 percent said maybe, and 18 percent answered yes. When asked if they would be willing to pay for such a service at a cost of about $5.00, 70 percent said no, 14 percent said maybe, and 16 percent agreed. In their conclusions, the authors noted that it was surprising that students would engage in an activity requiring an extended period of time (approximately one year) for completion and rather complicated content organizational patterns (such as in a history or geography course), and not establish a method of anticipating and recording progress. They suggested that perhaps the need for personal and content organization was not apparent to students when they began a correspondence course (p. 15) and recommended that:

> . . . materials be prepared which will enable a student to plan his study schedule from the time he submits his first lesson until he receives his final grades. This task requires the organization of certain data which will give the student an accurate estimate of what other typical, successfull students have done in that course, such as

> 'lesson-turn-around time', the preparation time for each lesson, and the time to study for, administer and grade the final exam. (p. 20)

They also recommended that:

> . . . each correspondence course prepared on contract by University of Illinois instructors be evaluated by peers of the Instructor, graduate students and potential users of the course before being used in the curriculum. The hypothesis is that poorly designed courses contribute to the fact that 1/3 of the students are not being challenged by their courses. (p. 20)

Daniel and Marquis (1978), in describing the Télé-université, identified the ideological issue surrounding managing student activities using course management schemes versus allowing students to engage in truly independent studies. They said:

> The ideological issue is simply stated. If a system has as its chief priority to respect the freedom and autonomy of the individual student, it will allow him to begin a course of study whenever he chooses and to finish it at his convenience. The student paces himself and there are no external constraints although the good correspondence school, whose model this is, will have a system of written reminders, encouraging phone calls and even financial incentives to incite him to keep at it. Nevertheless the dropout, or non-completion rate, with such a free approach is usually horrendous (over 50%) if the students are humans rather than angels . . .
>
> The usual way to encourage students to continue with a course is to provide some form of pacing, i.e., to introduce into the system a series of events taking place at fixed times which become deadlines for the students to meet . . . (Daniel and Marquis, sec. 2.4)

Field and Blacklock (1977) of the Open University illustrate another problem associated with systems that manage student activity in courses.

> It takes time to study -- time to learn. But how much further should we go? Students study for different reasons, and subsequently in different ways. Those with strong vocational needs may look for the shortest route to a qualification, doing only sufficient work to submit adequate assignments and scrape a pass, while those studying for enrichment or personal satisfaction may do much more work than they need on each and every unit. The same student may well approach different courses in different ways. Surely for degree level courses we must not spoonfeed -- we must present the whole experience: the richness, complexity and even confusion -- and let the student scan, skip and select what he needs. What is time? Does each hour have the same value? Is effort more important than time? Who can say that it is necessary to spend a certain defined time (and no more) to adequately assimilate a set of concepts or skills? (Field and Blacklock, p. 3)

To spend too much time in studies is sloth.

- Francis Bacon

Objectives of the Thesis

From the prior discussion it would appear that four factors affect the success of students enrolled in post-secondary level courses being delivered at a distance. These are:

1. the content of the course,
2. the structure or instructional design of the course,
3. the effectiveness of the student/tutor interaction, and
4. the management of student activity within the course.

The following study will deal with the latter two factors: the effect of tutors and the management of student activity.

Based on the review of the literature, the following objectives are set for this thesis:

1. To determine the effect of different course management systems upon completion rate, achievement, and student attitude in a course designed for adult learners and delivered at a distance.

2. To determine the effect of different tutors upon the completion rate, achievement, and student attitude in a course designed for adult learners and delivered at a distance.

3. To explore students' perceptions about why they completed or did not complete a course designed for adult learners for delivery at a distance.

CHAPTER 2

EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURE AND DESIGN

The Sample and Assignment to Groups

For the purposes of this investigation, 90 students, enrolled in Administration 232: Administrative Principles, a three-credit, introductory level, distance-delivered administration course offered by Athabasca University, were selected. The calendar description of the course appears below.

> Administration 232: Administrative Principles
>
> 3 credits (Applied)
>
> Administrative Principles deals with administration in general and with the basic administrative processes in particular. The course emphasizes translating administrative theory into effective administrative practice by examining both what administrators do and how they do it. The intent of the course is first to present theories of administration that are applicable to both the public and private sectors and second to reconcile these theories with current practice, focussing primarily on the student's experience.
>
> Credit Block 1
>
> Unit 1: Introduction to Administration (A Philosophy of Administration; A Point of Departure; Models)
>
> Unit 2: The Administrative Environment (Organizational Politics; Power; Organizational Conflict)

Credit Block 2

Unit 3: Planning
(Objectives; Guides to Decision Making; Forecasting and Strategy Formation; Creativity in Decision Making)

Unit 4: Organizing
(Cornerstones of Organizing; Authority; Bureaucracy to Adhocracy; Group Dynamics)

Credit Block 3

Unit 5: Leading
(Motivation; Behavioural Technology; Leadership; Communication)

Unit 6: Evaluating
(The Evaluation Process; Cost-Benefit Evaluation)

Unit 7: Summary
(Administration in the Future; An Attempt at Integration)

Course materials include one textbook and a seven-unit study guide.

Students are evaluated on the basis of unit exercises and three credit examinations.

Enrollment may take place at any time during the year.

The total cost of the course is $75.

Beginning October 1, 1978 and ending January 15, 1979, students enrolled in the course were assigned to a tutor and a particular course management system. Three tutors, henceforth called A, B, and C, were involved in the study. The first 30 students enrolling in the course were assigned to tutor B, the next 16 to tutor C, the next 30 to tutor A, and the final 14 to tutor C. The pattern of tutor assignment was determined by the

availability of tutors and was administered by the Registrar's Office of Athabasca University.

Each student was also assigned to one of three course management systems. The procedure for assignment was as follows. The first student assigned to a tutor was placed in course management system 1; the second, system 2; the third, system 3; the fourth, system 1; and so forth. Tutors notified students by mail regarding the course management system to which they had been assigned. (Copies of this correspondence appear in Appendix 1.) When the assignment of students was complete, each tutor had been assigned 30 students, ten in each course management system, as is illustrated below.

Table 1

Illustration of Assignment to Groups

		Tutor		
		A	B	C
Course Management System	1	n=10	n=10	n=10
	2	n=10	n=10	n=10
	3	n=10	n=10	n=10

Description of Treatments

Each treatment represented a different course management system involving tutor/student interaction and deadlines for the completion of unit assignments and examination for the first credit of the course. It was decided to use only the first credit block of the course for two reasons:

1. to expedite the study.
2. on the basis of previous research (Donehower, 1968) and anecdotal data which suggest that students who complete the first part of a distance-delivered course have a high probability of completing the remainder of the course.

The following activities comprised the first credit of the course:

1. Read chapters 1, 2, and 4 of the course text.
2. Complete unit exercise 1 and send it to the tutor for comments and grading.
3. Read chapters 5, 6, and 7 of the course text.
4. Complete unit exercise 2 and send it to the tutor for comments and grading.
5. Write the invigilated examination for credit one of the course.

Description of Course Management System 1

Students assigned to this group were informed by their tutors by mail that they had two months to complete the first credit of the course which included two tutor-marked assignments and a credit examination. The two-month time period began on the first day of the month following the student's enrollment in the course. For example, if a student registered on November 20, 1978, the two-month time period began December 1, 1978 and ended on January 31, 1979.

Tutors were instructed to make telephone contact with these students at approximately two-week intervals. Other forms of tutor contact included written feedback given on the unit exercises and student-initiated telephone calls.

Description of Course Management System 2

Students assigned to this group were contacted by mail by their tutors and given deadlines for completing each unit exercise and for writing the credit examination. Tutors were given the following instructions for determining these deadlines:

1. Set the date at the end of the two month completion period (same as for course management system 1). This is the deadline for writing the credit examination.

2. Subtract one month from the exam completion deadline. This is the deadline for completing and mailing Unit Assignment 2 to the tutor.

3. Subtract six weeks from the exam completion deadline. This is the deadline for completing and mailing Unit Assignment 1 to the tutor.

The number of days to be subtracted from the examination completion date was arrived at by estimating the time required for the student to work through the course materials, the marking time, and the mailing turn-around time.

Tutors were advised to make telephone contact with students in this course management system at approximately two-week intervals or when students fell behind schedule. When the latter occurred, tutors were told to encourage students to get back on schedule. Other forms of tutor contact included written feedback on assignments and student-initiated telephone calls.

Description of Course Management System 3

Like system 2, students in Course Management System 3 had deadlines for the completion of each unit exercise and for the writing of the credit examination. However, these deadlines were set by the students themselves, within the constraint of completing the first credit of the course within two months. Students were informed by mail of the course management system to which they had been assigned and responded by filling in a form stating the deadlines they had set, signing the form, and returning it to their tutor.

Again, tutors were advised to make contact with their students in this group at approximately two-week intervals or when

students failed to meet their deadlines. When the latter occurred, students were encouraged to get back on schedule. Other forms of student-tutor interaction included feedback on unit assignments and student-initiated telephone calls.

The Collection of Data

Upon completion of the first credit of the course (which was ascertained by the receipt of the credit examination) or when a student formally withdrew or when a student had not completed the first credit within three months of the start date, the following data were collected. For those students completing the first credit of the course:

1. they were classified as completions.
2. a composite mark composed of their grades on unit exercise one (15 percent), unit exercise two (25 percent), and their grade on the credit examination (60 percent) was recorded. Those students officially withdrawing or not completing the first credit of the course within three months were classified as non-completions.

In addition, questionnaires were mailed to all the students participating in the study and interviews conducted with a random sample of these students.

The Questionnaire

The covering letter and questionnaire appearing in Appendix 2

were mailed to students when they completed the first credit of the course, when they officially withdrew, or when they failed to complete the first credit of the course within three months.

Interviews

At about the same time as the mailing of the questionnaires, twenty-five randomly selected students from the sample were contacted by telephone and interviewed by the author. The interviews were quite brief and focussed on the question: Why, in the student's opinion, had they completed (or not completed) the first credit of the course?

Other Data

Simultaneously with the above-mentioned questionnaires and interviews, the Division of Institutional Research and Evaluation at Athabasca University also sent questionnaires to those students failing to complete the first credit of the course. A copy of the questionnaire appears in Appendix 4. As these questionnaires were anonymous in nature, correlations with tutors and course management systems could not be reported. The results, however, are reported in Chapter 3: Results and Analysis.

Chapter 3

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Overview of the Analysis

The completion and non-completion data for the students registered in the course were analysed on a between-tutors and on a between-course management systems basis. For this purpose a Tukey test for comparison of independent proportions[1] was chosen to determine the effect, if any, of the different tutors or course management system upon student completion.

In addition, for those students completing the first credit of the course, achievement data resulting in a composite grade based on marks received in two unit assignments and one invigilated examination was analysed on a between-tutors and between-groups basis. The test used in this instance was a two-way analysis of variance -- fixed effects model, with unequal cell sizes (ANOV25 available from the Division of Educational Research Services, University of Alberta).

Finally, the data resulting from the questionnaires sent

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[1] This non-paramatric test is available from the Division of Educational Research Services, University of Alberta, under the heading of DEST08. Normally a Z-test is used for comparing two independent proportions based on dichotomous data, however, since this analysis involved three proportions, the Tukey test was appropriate.

to ascertain students attitudes about tutor support and the course management system to which students had been assigned was tabulated using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (Nie et al., 1975).

Analysis of Completion Rates

Table 2 shows the tabulation of numbers of students completing the first credit of the course. Students are categorized by both course management system and tutor assignment. The null hypothesis of independence of course dropouts between tutor and between course management system was not rejected ($\chi^2 = .75$, $df = 4$, $p > .5$) indicating that dropout patterns were similar for all three tutors.

Of the thirty students assigned to each of the three course management systems, 15 (50 percent), 13 (43.3 percent), and 13 (43.3 percent), respectively, completed the first credit of the course (Table 3). Analysis showed that these data were not statistically significant at the 0.05 level (Table 4).

Of the thirty students assigned to each tutor, A, B, and C; 17 (56.7 percent), 13 (43.3 percent), and 11 (36.7 percent), respectively, completed credit one of the course (Table 5). Statistical analysis of these data showed that these results were not significant at the 0.05 level (Table 6).

Table 2

Tabulation of Completions by
Course Management System and by Tutor

		Tutor			
		A	B	C	Total
Course Management System	1	6	5	4	15
	2	5	5	3	13
	3	6	3	4	13
	Total	17	13	11	41

Table 3

Tabulation of Completions by
Course Management System

Course Management System	Number of Completions	Completion Rate (%)
1	15	50.0
2	13	43.3
3	13	43.3

Table 4

Studentized Range Statistics Resulting from Analysis of Completions by Course Management System[a]

		Course Management System		
		1	2	3
Course Management System	1	0.0		
	2	-0.722	0.0	
	3	-0.722	0.0	0.0

[a] The critical value for r = 3 and degrees of freedom = 87 is 3.370 for α = .05.

Table 5

Tabulation of Completion by Tutor

Tutor	Number of Completions	Completion Rate (%)
A	17	56.7
B	13	43.3
C	11	36.7

Table 6

Studentized Range Statistics Associated With Analysis of Completions by Tutor[a]

	Tutor A	Tutor B	Tutor C
Tutor A	0.0		
Tutor B	-1.462	0.0	
Tutor C	-2.193	-0.731	0.0

[a] The critical value for $r = 3$, degrees of freedom = 87, and $\alpha = .05$ is 3.370.

Analysis of Student Achievement

Achievement scores were recorded for those students completing credit one of the course (n = 41). Achievement scores were arrived at by averaging 15 percent of the grade received on unit exercise one, 25 percent of the grade received on unit exercise two, and 60 percent of the grade received on the credit examination. This composite score was the student's mark for Credit One and was recorded by the Registrar. Students were allowed to write one supplemental examination. Two students did this and, in these cases, the supplemental results were recorded.

Tables 7 and 8 show the mean achievement and their variances categorized by course management system and tutor. Since various proportions of students completed credit one of the course both by tutor and by treatment, it was necessary to use a two-way analysis of variance with unequal n's (Winer, 1971). Table 9 presents the results of the analysis of variance for the achievement scores of the fourty-one students completing the first credit of the course.

The analysis shows no significant effects due to the main variables of tutor and course management system; however, there was a significant interaction between the two variables ($p < .05$). Post hoc Scheffé tests indicated that the interaction was caused primarily by the low achievement average found for Tutor C under system 1.

Table 7

Mean Achievement (%) by
Course Management System and by Tutor

		Tutor		
		A	B	C
Course Management System	1	82.0	81.2	69.0
	2	79.0	80.2	83.3
	3	75.0	80.3	84.7

Table 8

Variance of Achievement Scores (%)

		Tutor		
		A	B	C
Course Management System	1	50.0	26.7	12.7
	2	154.0	25.2	32.3
	3	71.5	60.3	62.9

Table 9

Analysis of Variance Table for
Achievement Scores

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	d.f.	Mean Squares	F-ratio	Probability
Tutors (S_a)	92.44	2	46.22	0.802	0.457
Treatment (S_b)	22.75	2	11.37	0.197	0.822
Interaction (S_{ab})	677.62	4	169.41	2.941	0.035
Within Cells (S_e)	1843.13	32	57.60		

Results of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire and covering letter appearing in Appendix 2 were mailed to students following the student's completion or non-completion of Credit One of the course. Of the 90 questionnaires mailed, 36 were returned, constituting a 40 percent return rate. Of the returned questionnaires, 29 out of 41 were sent by students classified as completions, 7 out of 49 were sent by students classified as non-completions.

Tables 10 through 15 report the questionnaire responses sorted by course management system and by tutor assignment. Students' written comments appearing on the returned questionnaires are reported in Appendix 3.

Of the students assigned to course management system 1, 8 (66.7 percent) reported that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "I like having deadlines for the completion of the first credit of the course"; 8 (66.7 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that deadlines had helped them to better organize their studying time; however, only 5 (41.7 percent) agreed that the existence of deadlines had helped them to complete the first credit of the course more easily (Table 10).

Responses from students assigned to course management system 2 showed that only 6 (42.9 percent) of the students responding to the questionnaire agreed or strongly agreed that they like having deadlines. Also, only 4 (28.6 percent) felt that having deadlines

for the first credit of the course had helped them to better organize their studying time, and the same percentage agreed that deadlines had helped them to complete the first credit of the course more easily (Table 11).

Students assigned to course management system 3 showed more positive attitudes towards the deadlines with 8 (80 percent) agreeing or strongly agreeing that they liked having deadlines for the completion of the first credit of the course. Seven students (70 percent) felt that having deadlines had helped them to better organize their studying time. However, only 4 (40 percent) agreed that having deadlines had helped them to complete the first credit of the course more easily (Table 12).

Looking at students' preferences as to which scheduling option they would prefer to work under for the duration (final two credits) of the course, the most popular choice for students assigned to course management system 1 was "One deadline, set by the University, for finishing the remainder of the course" which was selected by 5 (41.7 percent) of the respondents. The next most popular choice was "Deadlines set by yourself for completing each assignment and exam for the remainder of the course" which was chosen by 4 (33.3 percent); followed by "Deadlines set by the University for completing each assignment and exam for the remainder of the course" which was chosen by 2 (16.7 percent); and 1 (8.3 percent) preferring no deadlines at all (Table 10).

Based on questionnaire responses, students assigned to course management system 2 far preferred "Deadlines set by yourself for completing each assignment and exam for the remainder of the course" with 7 students (50 percent) choosing this option. This was followed by "One deadline, set by the University, for finishing the remainder of the course" and "Deadlines set by the University for completing each assignment and exam for the remainder of the course" which tied at 2 students each (14.3 percent) preferring this option; 1 (7.1 percent) wanted no deadlines at all; and 2 (T4.3 percent) did not state their preference (Table 11).

Students in course management system 3 showed a similar trend. The questionnaire responses from this group showed 4 students (40 percent) wishing to set their own deadlines for each assignment and exam for the remainder of the course, 3 (30 percent) preferring one deadline set by the University, 2 (20 percent) wanting deadlines set by the University for completing each assignment and exam for the remainder of the course, and 1 (10 percent) opting for no deadlines at all (Table 12).

Tables 13, 14, and 15 show student responses to the questionnaires sorted according to tutor assignment. Responses from students assigned to Tutor A showed that 10 (71.4 percent) felt that their tutor had helped them to progress through the course and 12 (85.7 percent) felt that their interactions with their tutor had been worthwhile (Table 13). Similarly, 7 (58.4 percent) of students assigned

to Tutor B felt that their tutor had helped them to progress through the first credit of the course and 9 (75 percent) felt that their interactions had been worthwhile (Table 14). Of the students responding who had been assigned to Tutor C, 5 (50 percent) felt that their tutor had helped them to progress through the first credit of the course and 5 (50 percent) felt that their interactions had been worthwhile (Table 15).

Table 10

Questionnaire Results: Students Assigned to Course Management System 1 (n=12) (Percentages appear in parentheses.)

STATEMENT	strongly disagree	disagree	no opinion	agree	strongly agree	not stated
1. I felt that my tutor helped me to progress through the first credit of the course.	0	2 (16.7)	3 (25.0)	6 (50.0)	1 (8.3)	0
2. I felt that my interactions with my tutor were worth while.	0	1 (8.3)	4 (33.3)	5 (41.7)	2 (16.7)	0
3. I like having deadlines for the completion of the first credit of the course.	0	1 (8.3)	2 (16.7)	5 (41.7)	3 (25.0)	1 (8.3)
4. I felt that having deadlines for the first credit of the course helped me to better organize my studying time.	0	1 (8.3)	3 (25.0)	7 (58.3)	1 (8.3)	0
5. I felt that having deadlines for the completion of the first credit of the course helped me to complete it more easily.	1 (8.3)	2 (16.7)	4 (33.3)	5 (41.7)	0	0

6. If you are continuing on with the course, which of the following scheduling options would you prefer to work under for the duration of the course?

5 (41.7)	One deadline, set by the University, for finishing the remainder of the course.
2 (16.7)	Deadlines set by the University for completing each assignment and exam for the remainder of the course.
4 (33.3)	Deadlines set by yourself for completing each assignment and exam for the remainder of the course.
1 (8.3)	No deadlines.
0	Not stated.

Table 11

Questionnaire Results: Students Assigned to Course Management System 2

(n=14) (Percentages appear in parentheses.)

STATEMENT	strongly disagree	disagree	no opinion	agree	strongly agree	not stated
1. I felt that my tutor helped me to progress through the first credit of the course.	0	2 (14.3)	3 (21.4)	3 (21.4)	4 (28.6)	2 (14.3)
2. I felt that my interactions with my tutor were worth while.	0	0	3 (21.4)	5 (35.7)	5 (35.7)	1 (7.1)
3. I like having deadlines for the completion of the first credit of the course.	1 (7.1)	2 (14.3)	3 (21.4)	4 (28.6)	2 (14.3)	2 (14.3)
4. I felt that having deadlines for the first credit of the course helped me to better organize my studying time.	2 (14.3)	3 (21.4)	2 (14.3)	4 (28.6)	0	3 (21.4)
5. I felt that having deadlines for the completion of the first credit of the course helped me to complete it more easily.	1 (7.1)	5 (35.7)	1 (7.1)	4 (28.6)	0	3 (21.4)

6. If you are continuing on with the course, which of the following scheduling options would you prefer to work under for the duration of the course?

2 (14.3)	One deadline, set by the University, for finishing the remainder of the course.
2 (14.3)	Deadlines set by the University for completing each assignment and exam for the remainder of the course.
7 (50.0)	Deadlines set by yourself for completing each assignment and exam for the remainder of the course.
1 (7.1)	No deadlines.
2 (14.3)	Not stated.

Table 12

Questionnaire Results: Students Assigned to Course Management System 3 (n=10) (Percentages appear in parentheses.)

STATEMENT	strongly disagree	disagree	no opinion	agree	strongly agree	not stated
1. I felt that my tutor helped me to progress through the first credit of the course.	0	0	2 (20)	6 (60)	2 (20)	0
2. I felt that my interactions with my tutor were worth while.	0	0	1 (10)	7 (70)	2 (20)	0
3. I like having deadlines for the completion of the first credit of the course.	0	2 (20)	0	7 (70)	1 (10)	0
4. I felt that having deadlines for the first credit of the course helped me to better organize my studying time.	0	3 (30)	0	5 (50)	2 (20)	0
5. I felt that having deadlines for the completion of the first credit of the course helped me to complete it more easily.	1 (10)	3 (30)	2 (20)	4 (40)	0	0

6. If you are continuing on with the course, which of the following scheduling options would you prefer to work under for the duration of the course?

3 (30)	One deadline, set by the University, for finishing the remainder of the course.
2 (20)	Deadlines set by the University for completing each assignment and exam for the remainder of the course.
4 (40)	Deadlines set by yourself for completing each assignment and exam for the remainder of the course.
1 (10)	No deadline.
0	Not stated.

Table 13

Questionnaire Results: Students Assigned to Tutor A

(n=14) (Percentages appear in parentheses.)

STATEMENT	strongly disagree	disagree	no opinion	agree	strongly agree	not stated
1. I felt that my tutor helped me to progress through the first credit of the course.	0	0	3 (21.4)	5 (35.7)	5 (35.7)	1 (7.1)
2. I felt that my interactions with my tutor were worth while.	0	0	1 (7.1)	7 (50.0)	5 (35.7)	1 (7.1)
3. I like having deadlines for the completion of the first credit of the course.	0	1 (7.1)	1 (7.1)	8 (57.1)	2 (14.3)	2 (14.3)
4. I felt that having deadlines for the first credit of the course helped me to better organize my studying time.	1 (7.1)	3 (21.4)	1 (7.1)	4 (28.6)	3 (21.4)	2 (14.3)
5. I felt that having deadlines for the completion of the first credit of the course helped me to complete it more easily.	0	4 (28.6)	3 (21.4)	5 (35.7)	0	2 (14.3)

6. If you are continuing on with the course, which of the following scheduling options would you prefer to work under for the duration of the course?

4 (28.6)	One deadline, set by the University, for finishing the remainder of the course.
1 (7.1)	Deadlines set by the University for completing each assignment and exam for the remainder of the course.
5 (35.7)	Deadlines set by yourself for completing each assignment and exam for the remainder of the course.
1 (7.1)	No deadlines.
1 (7.1)	Not stated.

Table 14

Questionnaire Results: Students Assigned to Tutor B

(n=12) (Percentages appear in parentheses.)

STATEMENT	strongly disagree	disagree	no opinion	agree	strongly agree	not stated
1. I felt that my tutor helped me to progress through the first credit of the course.	0	2 (16.7)	2 (16.7)	5 (41.7)	2 (16.7)	1 (8.3)
2. I felt that my interactions with my tutor were worth while.	0	0	3 (25.0)	6 (50.0)	3 (25.0)	0
3. I like having deadlines for the completion of the first credit of the course.	1 (8.3)	4 (33.3)	1 (8.3)	3 (25.0)	3 (25.0)	0
4. I felt that having deadlines for the first credit of the course helped me to better organize my studying time.	1 (8.3)	4 (33.3)	1 (8.3)	5 (41.7)	0	1 (8.3)
5. I felt that having dealines for the completion of the first credit of the course helped me to complete it more easily.	3 (25.0)	4 (33.3)	0	4 (33.3)	0	1 (8.3)

6. If you are continuing on with the course, which of the following scheduling options would you prefer to work under for the duration of the course?

2 (16.7)	One deadline, set by the University, for finishing the remainder of the course.
0	Deadlines set by the University for completing each assignment and exam for the remainder of the course.
7 (58.3)	Deadlines set by yourself for completing each assignment and exam for the remainder of the course.
2 (16.7)	No deadlines.
1 (8.3)	Not stated.

Table 15

Questionnaire Results: Students Assigned to Tutor C

(n=10) (Percentages appear in parentheses.)

STATEMENT	strongly disagree	disagree	no opinion	agree	strongly agree	not stated
1. I felt that my tutor helped me to progress through the first credit of the course.	0	2 (20)	3 (30)	4 (40)	1 (10)	0
2. I felt that my interactions with my tutor were worth while.	0	1 (10)	4 (40)	4 (40)	1 (10)	0
3. I like having deadlines for the completion of the first credit of the course.	0	0	3 (30)	5 (50)	1 (10)	1 (10)
4. I felt that having deadlines for the first credit of the course helped me to better organize my studying time.	0	0	2 (20)	7 (70)	0	1 (10)
5. I felt that having deadlines for the completion of the first credit of the course helped me to complete it more easily.	0	2 (20)	3 (30)	4 (40)	0	1 (10)

6. If you are continuing on with the course, which of the following scheduling options would you prefer to work under for the duration of the course?

3 (30)	One deadline, set by the University, for finishing the remainder of the course.
4 (40)	Deadlines set by the University for completing each assignment and exam for the remainder of the course.
3 (30)	Deadlines set by yourself for completing each assignment and exam for the remainder of the course.
0	No deadlines.
0	Not stated.

Results of the Interviews

Of the ninety students involved in the study, twenty-five were selected at random and contacted by the author by telephone. Of those students selected, 12 had completed the first credit of the course, 13 had not. The interview focussed on one question: Why, in the student's opinion, had he or she completed (or not completed) the first credit of the course?

Of the students completing the first credit of the course, the responses were categorized as follows:

6 Work/Career (e.g., "I need (or can use) this course to help me in my job.")

4 General Interest (e.g., "I really enjoyed the content area and found the course fun to work on.")

2 Personality Factors (e.g., "I always finish everything I start.")

Responses from those students not completing the first credit of the course were categorized as follows. (Some students cited more than one reason which accounts for the total being greater than 13.)

9 Time Factors (e.g., "I got a promotion and have been working 16-hour days." or "There's a real housing boom happening in Vegreville so I don't have as much spare time as I anticipated.")

2 Nature of the Course (e.g., "It was too difficult." or "Too many essay type questions.")

2 Illness

2 Moved

Other Data

At about the same time as the mailing of the formerly-mentioned questionnaires, the Division of Institutional Research and Evaluation at Athabasca University mailed questionnaires to those students failing to complete credit one of the course. Due to the anonomous nature of these questionnaires, it was impossible to categorize the responses by treatment group or by tutor. Ten questionnaires were returned and the results are reported below. Also, for those questions requesting student's written comments, the comments appear in italic following the question (Table 16).

Table 16

Results of the Questionnaire Mailed by Athabasca University

1. Did you know that you were going to be designated as "withdrawn" from the course you were taking?

6 Yes 1 No 3 Wasn't Sure 0 No Response

2. a) Did you know that you could obtain an extension to your Introductory Package deadline and resume your studies at a later date at no additional cost to you?

7 Yes 3 No

b) Would you have withdrawn from the course if you had known that you could have obtained an extension to your deadline?

__5__ Yes __1__ No __4__ Not Applicable

c) If you did know, why did you not consider an extension instead of withdrawing?

- *I started another job.*
- *A short term extension would not have solved my problem.*
- *An extension of time would have been insufficient.*
- *I did not find the material interesting and doubted if my feelings would change.*
- *I started a new job.*

3. a) Would you like to continue in the course?

__4__ Yes __2__ No __4__ Undecided

b) If YES, is there anything we can do to help you to continue?

- *I found the course content very confusing at first. It seemed to have been written for a person with a higher educational level than I possess. This at first turned me off the course and only after help from my tutor was I able to grasp the content. I possibly should have started on an easier subject.*

4. When did you begin to think that you might not continue in the course? (Check one).

____ I wasn't sure I wanted to take the course in the first place.

__2__ When I looked over the material in the Introductory Package.

__5__ After I attempted the first assignment/test/exercise.

____ At the time I was due to write the first Credit Exam.

__1__ After I wrote the first Credit Exam.

__3__ Other (please specify).

- *Too many questions of the long answer type.*

- *Before I began the course we had numerous family problems which have still not resolved themselves.*

- *When my shift changed.*

5. Although you are not continuing with the course you were enrolled in, you still might have learned something from the experience. Check all of the following that describe your experience.

__3__ The experience wasn't at all what I expected.

_____ The experience had no effect on me.

__4__ I'm disappointed I didn't complete the course.

__3__ I think I learned something of value from the course.

_____ I realized that the course didn't suit my needs and interests, and I have since enrolled in a more appropriate course.

__1__ I am more confident that I can successfully handle university level studies.

__9__ I think I would have continued if I hadn't been bothered with problems not related to the course (for example, new job, new baby, a move, a death, a financial strain).

_____ My whole experience with Athabasca University and the course was negative, and I found it very unsatisfying.

_____ Other (please specify) _____

6. a) Is there anything we could have done to keep you in the course?

__2__ Yes __6__ No (if not, go to question 7)

b) Would you have continued in the course if:

	Yes	No	Undecided
your administrative dealings with the university had been simpler and more direct?	( )	(1)	( )
course materials were sent to you more promptly?	( )	(1)	( )
the content had been more interesting?	(2)	(1)	( )
the course had been better organized?	( )	(1)	( )
the tutor had been more helpful?	(1)	( )	( )
there had been regularly scheduled meetings with tutors and other students?	( )	(1)	( )

something else (please specify)

_____

_____

_____

7. Would you consider another course at Athabasca University?

8 Yes 2 Possibly 0 No

8. Is there anything else you can tell us about why you are not continuing in the course?

- *Not being able to budget a certain amount of time daily to the course due to shift work and overtime as well as a certain amount of time to family life was the biggest factor in having to withdraw. Also, in answering essay type questions, one must be able to devote longer periods of time than was available to me. Although I had little chance to meet my tutor, he appeared to be very willing to offer assistance.*

- *I'd prefer to do courses like psychology, literature -- courses that I pursued as minors and majors at University.*

- *No, but I would like to say that I felt that my tutor certainly did everything he could to get me interested in the course.*

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

Conclusions

From the results of the study reported herein, it appears that the management of student activity through the three different course management systems has little effect, if any, upon course completion and achievement, and that tutor assignment bears the same conclusion. Statistical analysis of these data gave non-significant findings with one exception. The two-way analysis of variance performed on the achievement data showed a significant interaction effect, however, due to the small cell sizes, the finding may be spurious.

Responses to the questionnaire mailed to students upon their completion or non-completion of the first credit of the course proved to be somewhat more illuminating. These results will be elaborated upon below.

Clearly students do want deadlines to work under and toward. And, for the majority, students want to work under deadlines that they have set for themselves. In this study, the majority (more than two-thirds) of the students agreed that they liked having deadlines and that deadlines had helped them to better organize their studying time. However, only about 40 percent (13 out of 36) of the students felt that deadlines set through the course management system to which they

had been assigned had helped them to complete the first credit of the course more easily.

However, these results contrast sharply with responses from students assigned to the course management system in which deadlines were given to students, by the University, for completing each assignment and the examination for the completion of the first credit of the course (course management system 2). In this group only 6 (42.9 percent) stated that they liked having deadlines, 4 (28.6 percent) felt that deadlines had helped them to better organize their studying time, and 4 (28.6 percent) felt that the existance of deadlines had helped them to finish the course more easily. Evidently, students in course management system 2 did not like having deadlines assigned to them, especially several deadlines (one for each assignment and for the credit examination).

This attitude was also evidenced in the other groups by the option: "Deadlines set by the University for the completion of each assignment and exam for the remainder of the course" definitely <u>not</u> being preferred by either the students in course management system 1 (students with only one deadline) or in course management system 3 (students who set their own deadlines) as the scheduling option they would prefer for completing the remainder of the course.

However, other than that students do want to work under some system of deadlines to help them manage their course activities, there is no clear indication as to what kind of system they wish to

work under. Students in course management system 1 responded with 5 (41.7 percent) wishing to complete the course with one deadline set by the university for completion the remainder of the course (the same system under which they had worked for completing the first credit); and 4 (33.3 percent) wishing to work under deadlines, set by themselves, for completing each assignment and examination for the remainder of the course. Students in course management systems 2 and 3 preferred to complete the course by setting deadlines for themselves for each assignment and examination, with 7 (50 percent) and 4 (40 percent), respectively, choosing this option.

Despite the indication that it is not clear what type of course management system students want to work under, it is clear what they do not wish. Students do not wish to work without deadlines, as this option was preferred by only 1 student in each of course management systems 1, 2, and 3.

Also, supporting this finding, it is interesting to note that the main reason given by students not completing the first credit of the course when they were interviewed has to do with lack of time. Although some of their reasons for not completing the course could not have been affected by a system of deadlines, it appears that for some students, adherence to a course management system might have prevented them from withdrawing -- allowing these students to better manage their time in a context of conflicting demands of work and family. On the other hand, the existence of a course management system which set out deadlines for students to work towards may

have also precipitated student withdrawal. However, comments from the students involved in this study show no indication of this.

Although students do appear to want to work under a system of deadlines, the majority of students reported that having deadlines for the completion of the first credit of the course had not helped them to complete this part of the course more easily. This result could be explained by harkening back to the literature review where it was stated that student success in courses delivered at a distance is dependent on four factors:

1. the content of the course,
2. the structure or instructional design of the course,
3. the management of student activity, and
4. the effect of tutors.

Thus far, we have only looked at the management of student activity, which was manipulated using the three different course management systems. Also as the ensuing discussion will note, students appear to be satisfied with the tutorial services they are receiving. This leaves two factors to explain the above-mentioned discrepancy for students not being successful in their learning -- the content of the course and the structure or instructional design of the course. Either the course content or its structure, or both of these, is proving difficult for students engaged in the course.

Looking at the responses gained from the interviews

conducted with students, almost all students stated that they had found the course interesting and relevant. Thus, it would appear that the content of the course is not a problem. Likely then, the problems for the students' difficulty in completing the first credit of the course lies with the structure or instructional design of the course -- a factor not directly addressed by this study. Responses from the interviews conducted in this study and responses from those students completing the questionnaire mailed by the Division of Institutional Research and Evaluation of Athabasca University do show that some students reported that the long-answer, essay-type questions found in the course to be adversive to their completion of credit one of the course.

As mentioned earlier, the final factor dealing with student success in distance-delivered courses lies with tutor effects. In the course studied herein, for two of the three tutors involved in this study, students felt (1) that their tutor had helped them to progress through the first credit of the course and (2) that their interactions with their tutor had been worthwhile. The least positive indication of these factors lay with the third tutor, Tutor C, where 50 percent of students assigned to this tutor answered positively to these two questions, the remaining 50 percent answered negatively or neutrally.

An interesting correlation emerges when students' attitudes

towards their tutor are looked in the context of number of completions of students assigned to a particular tutor. Although statistical analysis of student completions by tutor were not significant, the tutor with the highest number of completions (Tutor A with 17 out of 30 students completing) also showed the most positive attitudes of students towards their tutor. Similarly, the tutor with the lowest number of completions (Tutor C with 11 out of 30 students completing) showed the most negative attitudes of students towards their tutor.

Implications

Student's perceptions about the usefulness of course management systems -- systems which manage student activity in courses -- and of tutor selection and interaction warrant acknowledgement of educators planning courses to be delivered at a distance to adult learners. Based on the prior discussion of the results of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The development of course management systems should be an integral part of the course development process. Without a careful plan which manages student activity and student interaction with course materials, even the most relevant, most interesting course will not be completed by many students because they do not work through the course materials in an effective and efficient manner.

2. Course management systems should allow for individual differences. That is to say, alternative course management systems should be available and students should have a choice in the selection of the management system under which they are to work.

3. As tutors appear to make a difference in student success, more study needs to be done explaining what qualities, skills, and course preparation are required for a tutor to be effective in distance-delivered courses.

Directions for Further Study

The findings of this study support the need for the management of student activity in courses to be delivered at a distance and the need for effective tutor interaction with students. However, it is not clear what the best student management system or systems are or if particular management systems work for some students better than others. More research needs to be conducted exploring this issue, especially in the area of attribute-treatment interaction which shall likely show that students with particular characteristics respond better to a particular course management system. Also, research focussing on the relationship between actual student behaviour vis a vis the particular course management system under which the student is studying needs to be explored.

Similarly, the nature of tutor-student interaction needs to be further researched to determine what characteristics and behaviours of tutors maximize the learning process for adult learners

engaged in courses delivered at a distance.

Finally, for those students mentioned above, the consideration of course content and structure need to be incorporated. By doing such, we may gain a comprehensive picture of what constitutes a successful learning experience for adults engaged in distance-delivered courses.

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APPENDIX I

CORRESPONDENCE TO STUDENTS

Course Management System 1

TO: _____

FROM: _____

DATE: _____

A NOTE ABOUT COURSE PROGRESS

Please remember that you have two months to complete the first credit block of the course. This includes satisfactory completion of two exercises and of the credit one exam. Because you received the course materials for Administrative Principles on about _____ _____ you should have completed the credit exam by _____. There will be about a ten-day turn-around period from the time you send your completed assignment to your tutor until you receive it back. However, you should continue on with the next unit during this period. Also, please give 10 days notice of the time when you would like to write the credit examination.

Course Management System 2

TO: _____

FROM: _____

DATE: _____

A NOTE ABOUT COURSE PROGRESS

Please remember that you have two months to complete the first credit block of the course. This includes satisfactory completion of two exercises and of the credit one exam. You received the course materials for Administrative Principles on about _____ _____. In order to complete the first credit in two months we ask you to meet the following deadlines. You should have delivered or mailed your:

Unit 1 assignment by _____ and your

Unit 2 assignment by _____.

You should have written your Credit one examination by _____. There will be about a ten-day turnaround period from the time you mail your completed assignment until you receive it back. However, continue on with the next during this period. Also, please give 10 days notice of the time when you would like to write the credit examination.

Course Management System 3

TO: _____

FROM: _____

DATE: _____

A NOTE ABOUT COURSE PROGRESS

Please remember that you have two months to complete the first credit block of the course. This includes satisfactory completion of two exercises and of the credit one examination. You received the course materials on about _____, therefore you should have completed the credit one exam by _____. There will be about a ten day turnaround period from the time you mail your completed assignment until you receive it back. However, you should continue on with the next unit during this period. Also, please give 10 days notice of the time when you would like to write the credit examination.

At this time, with the above information in mind, we would like you to set out a course completion schedule for the first credit of the course. On the attached forms please fill in the date when you will mail or deliver your completed assignments and when you will write the credit one exam. When you have done this, sign one of the forms and return it to your tutor with your first assignment. Keep the other form for your own records.

INDIVIDUAL STUDY SCHEDULE FOR

_____

Administrative Principles: Credit 1

Course Start Date: _____

Completion date for Introductory Package: _____

Course Activity	Expected Completion Date
Unit 1 Assignment	_____
Unit 2 Assignment	_____
Examination	_____

_____ _____

Date Signature

APPENDIX 2

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

14515-122 Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta
Canada T5L 2W4
(403) 452-9990

Athabasca University

Over the past few months, a project has been conducted at Athabasca University to explore the effects of course deadlines on the completion of a course, or as has been the case in Administrative Principles, on the completion of the first credit of the course. As well, we are interested in collecting students' feelings about the usefulness and helpfulness of tutors.

To this end, we would appreciate your cooperation in filling out the enclosed questionnaire and returning it in the envelope provided. By doing this, you will be helping us to serve you and other students better in the future.

Your help is greatly appreciated.

Yours sincerely,

Susan D. Phillips
Instructional Designer

SDP:ge

COURSE QUESTIONNAIRE ADMINISTRATION 232: ADMINISTRATIVE PRINCIPLES

Name: _____

1. I felt that may tutor helped me to progress through the first credit of the course.

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree

2. I felt that my interactions with my tutor were worthwhile.

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree

3. I liked having deadlines for the completion of the first credit of the course.

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree

4. I felt that having deadlines for the completion of the first credit of the course helped me to better organize my studying time.

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree

5. I felt that having deadlines for the completion of the first credit of the course helped me to complete it more easily.

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree

6. If you are continuing on with the course, which of the following scheduling options would you prefer to work under for the duration of the course?

_____ One deadline, set by the University, for finishing the remainder of the course.

_____ Deadlines set by the University for completing each assignment and exam for the remainder of the course.

_____ Deadlines set by yourself for completing each assignment and exam for the remainder of the course.

_____ No deadlines.

7. If you would like to make any additional comments about the course, please do so in the space provided.

ALL REPLIES WILL BE HELD STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL.

APPENDIX 3

COMMENTS FROM RETURNED QUESTIONNAIRES

Course Management System/ Tutor	Comments
2A	Since I wasn't the "typical" student and since I knew ahead of time that I would switch from home study to the classroom delivery, I feel that my response to the questionnaire would not be valid.
3A	Was unable to complete the course by the deadline because of work and home demands. As a working mother of three I found that my intentions at the beginning were the best, there are simply not enough hours in the day to accommodate any other activites. If you wish any further information please call.
1A	I feel there should be contact for interaction between students and prof. at least once per month perhaps one evening per month when questions could be asked and discussions held.
3A	The tutor for my course could have been a lot of help if I would have taken the time to let her know some things were not very clear, I am sure that during the next segment I will be in contact with her more often.
2A	The need for examples of concepts from real life presents a problem for those who lack the experience of real life situations. The exam also presented this problem. Contained in the exam there was also a question that assumed knowledge of various occupations. When assignments are returned they do not always indicate what was missing in the answer. Nor was the exam reviewed to determine errors. I feel that learning from experience is important and is in fact a main goal of the course design. This would be facilitated by knowing what was missing in questions where full marks were not received.

Course Management System Tutor	Comments
2A	1. Completion time for Credit 1, Administration 232, was too long. I suggest that you reduce it by a minimum of two weeks. 2. The prime problem is turnaround time for assignments and exams. If this time is too long, then the student either gets lax or gets stale because he lacks the necessary positive reinforcement that assignment and exam results provide. This turnaround time should be an absolute maximum of ten days with a preferred time of one week. However, the irregular service provided by the postal department makes a one week turnaround time impossible. Ten days would be entirely possible except for one problem. Experience has shown that assignments sent directly to tutors are speedily returned. However, assignments processed by the clerical staff at the university are inexplicably delayed. As a matter of fact, all correspondence through the clerical staff at the university seems to be delayed. This includes exam requests and exam results. If this delay could be removed, then the turnaround time would be reduced to acceptable limits.
3A	For some of the students who have no administrative jobs, the design of unit exercise three questions are difficult to answer or analyze. I would suggest to make a provision for nonadministrative job students.
1A	Unfortunately I could not fullfill the requirements of deadlines due to illness and hospitalization, however under normal circumstances, deadlines would have been acceptable. Deadlines are necessary, however flexibility should exist for special circumstances.

Course Management System/ Tutor	Comments
1A	In this course, the moral support from the tutor counted more than actual instruction. Most people will work better under pressure as created by a deadline.
1A	Although I prefer to set my own deadlines, I would recommend the University set the deadlines. I would probably comply with deadlines set by someone else sooner than I would my own.
1A	A major reason for taking a course by correspondence is that it lets me set my own pace, governed only by my desire and those limitations set by my job.
1B	I was unable to complete my first credit due to my private life upheaval . . . moving, family, and too many commitments.
2B	I am sorry that I did not progress far enough in the course to be able to fully answer all of your questions, but I would like to answer by simply making a few quick notes on my observations. Deadlines set by the University are required and appeared to be realistic and attainable. My interactions with my tutor were very positive and his offered assistance appreciated. Due to number of memos and communiques in every day business most companies provide their employees with courses in "Effective Communicating" etc., whereby one is taught to be brief and to the point, I sometimes felt I was involved in writing an essay for some of the questions. Short answer questions could be easier for the student who can only "grab" a few minutes here and there on course studies but in the same instance show whether or not the student is obtaining the requirements of the course.

Course Management System/ Tutor	Comments
2B	I feel that the time allotted for the course was not enough for the material to be covered and the time required for each assignment. I have ignored the deadlines.
1B	Did not receive unit exercises back for reviewing before I wrote the exams.
1B	In spite of my answers to 1 and 2, I feel the tutors are required. They are essentially the only personal contact in the University and if assistance or classification is required on a course, who else would be able to provide it? Regarding deadlines, I feel the overall deadlines for completion of the introductory part are definitely required to get the students going. The deadline for course completion is as important so the student has some other impetus (other than his own) to keep going and finish the course. Deadlines for each assignment should be left up to the student, after all the courses are self-paced and not in a formal lecture type structured situation. In my own case, if the assignment deadlines had been established for me, I wouldn't make it because of non-course activities. I feel 6 months and 12 months for 3 and 6 credit courses is a reasonable interval and should be maintained.
1B	I felt that there was far too long a delay after I wrote the 1st exam until I heard results and felt I could go on to unit 2. I wrote the Statistics exam in the third week of November and it was not until well after X-mas that I had my results back and then well into January before I got the remainder of the course as I was under the impression I had to have the results back before I could apply for the balance of the course. Then I applied to write the Admin. exam before Nov. 30, and did not have an answer until Jan. My last assignment got lost and the tutor had to send me a photocopy of my marks. I finally

Course Management System/ Tutor	Comments
	wrote the exam Jan. 28. I had a copy of the letter that had been sent with the exam to the supervisor and I received the letter on Jan. 11 -- but the exam did not arrive until Jan. 26. I checked the post-marks and both had been mailed out on the same day. So blame our mails! I really felt I lost a lot of time as well as continuity. Hopefully I shall be finished before June!
3B	I'm totally disappointed with the return of assignments from my tutor. It took nearly a month before I got my first assignment back, and I am still waiting for my other assignment completed at the end of November, 1978!! I'm sure the mail service is not to blame for the second time.
2C	My tutor is new and when I needed advice he had not yet attended a major meeting. I receive no comments on my assignments.
2C	Questions 3, 4, and 5 n/a as I set my own schedule to complete the whole course in 3 months. I think many students, especially those away from school for some time, benefit from a schedule of some sort. GREAT COURSE!
3C	Although I dislike the idea of schedules or deadlines to be set for me by someone else, I realize that I sometimes lack the self-discipline required to get going. Deadlines also seem to serve as motivation and encouragement for me because they make it seem as though someone at Athabasca <u>does</u> care and it is good to know there is some regulation for this "open" style of campus. I believe few people have the self-discipline throughout their lives to complete many of the things they start. Schedules and deadlines supply the controls that are so much needed. Lack of them indicates, to me at least, a kind of apathy.

Course Management System/ Tutor	Comments
2C	I feel any marks taken off should be explained so the student can correct his errors.
1C	The only problem I have is with the time set for me with my tutor. I am an evening worker and the evening set aside for me to contact my tutor is not possible. I feel that two nights should be offered and the students preferred evening submitted to the tutor.
1C	I feel that there should be deadlines. But I see no reason to strictly enforce them.

APPENDIX 4

QUESTIONNAIRE MAILED BY ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

Will you take a few minutes . . .

to help us do a better job of making university learning possible for adult Albertans? Your responses to the following questions can help us to do that.

A few minutes of your time will help us to begin correcting problems, especially the problem that caused you to withdraw from the course you were taking. And if the problem is something we cannot do anything about, letting us know that will allow us to concentrate on what we can change. It will also help us to worry a little less.

Please answer as many questions as you can, as completely as you can. Don't worry about leaving some questions out—we would like to receive your questionnaire even if you haven't answered everything. If you have withdrawn from more than one course, you only need to fill in one of these forms. We would, however, like to know if you withdrew from different courses for different reasons.

If you have any questions about our questions or about the study in general, or if you would like another questionnaire, please feel free to get in touch with Doug Shale here at the University (telephone 452-9990 or write 14515 - 122 Avenue, Edmonton, T5L 2W4).

1. Did you know that you were going to be designated as "withdrawn" from the course you were taking? Yes ☐ No ☐ Wasn't sure ☐

2. (a) Did you know that you could obtain an extension to your Introductory Package deadline and resume your studies at a later date at no additional cost to you? Yes ☐ No ☐

(b) Would you have withdrawn from the course if you had known that you could have obtained an extension to your deadline? Yes ☐ No ☐ Not applicable ☐

(c) If you did know, why did you not consider an extension instead of withdrawing?

.....

.....

.....

3. (a) Would you like to continue in the course? Yes ☐ No ☐ Undecided ☐

(b) If YES, is there anything we can do to help you to continue?

.....

.....

.....

4. When did you begin to think that you might not continue in the course? (Check one).

- ☐ I wasn't sure I wanted to take the course in the first place.
- ☐ When I looked over the material in the Introductory Package.
- ☐ After I attempted the first assignment/test/exercise.
- ☐ At the time I was due to write the first Credit Exam.
- ☐ After I wrote the first Credit Exam.
- ☐ Other (please specify) .....

.....

.....

5. Although you are not continuing with the course you were enrolled in, you still might have learned something from the experience. Check *all* of the following that describe your experience.

- ☐ The experience wasn't at all what I expected.
- ☐ The experience had no effect on me.
- ☐ I'm disappointed I didn't complete the course.
- ☐ I think I learned something of value from the course.
- ☐ I realized that the course didn't suit my needs and interests, and I have since enrolled in a more appropriate course.
- ☐ I am more confident that I can successfully handle university level studies.
- ☐ I think I would have continued if I hadn't been bothered with problems not related to the course (for example, new job, new baby, a move, a death, a financial strain).
- ☐ My whole experience with Athabasca University and the course was negative, and I found it very unsatisfying.
- ☐ Other (please specify) .....

.....

.....

6. (a) Is there anything we could have done to keep you in the course? Yes ☐ No ☐ (if not, go to question 7)

(b) Would you have continued in the course if:

	Yes	No	Undecided
your administrative dealings with the university had been simpler and more direct?	☐	☐	☐
course materials were sent to you more promptly?	☐	☐	☐
the content had been more interesting?	☐	☐	☐
the course had been better organized?	☐	☐	☐
the tutor had been more helpful?	☐	☐	☐
there had been regularly scheduled meetings with tutors and other students?	☐	☐	☐
something else (please specify)	☐	☐	☐

.....

.....

.....

7. Would you consider doing another course at Athabasca University? Yes ☐ Possibly ☐ No ☐

8. Is there anything else you can tell us about why you are not continuing in the course?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

You have now completed the questionnaire. Thank you once again for your assistance. Please place this form in the envelope provided and send it off as soon as you can.

If you are interested in the results of this survey, fill in the blue reply card with the information requested and return the card to us. If you are concerned about your responses remaining anonymous, send the card in separately. Later, we will send you a summary of the results of the study.

Although this sticker provides us with some useful information that will help us to interpret more effectively the responses to this questionnaire, the information cannot be used to identify you or your answers.